

Cattle herd tests negative for brucellosis Focus now shifts to herd in Bridger

By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer

LIVINGSTON — It might have sounded like a typical Paradise Valley wind gust, but it was really a giant sigh of relief from the Bruce Malcolm family, neighboring ranchers, regulators and others concerned about wildlife and livestock in this scenic valley.

The cause of the sigh was the fastspreading news that Malcolm's cattle herd had tested negative for any signs of brucellosis. The Montana Department of Livestock made the announcement Wednesday afternoon.

"We're not out of the woods yet, but it was the biggest, scariest single hurdle we've had so far," said Montana Department of Livestock spokesman Tom Daubert.

While that doesn't mean the state and federal disease investigation is complete, it does shift the focus of that work back to Bridger, a small town south of Laurel where six brucellosis-infected cattle were found last week.

That ranch belongs to Malcolm's daughter and son-in-law, and some of the infected cattle had spent time on his ranch.

That link is what made state livestock and U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services investigators hone in on Malcolm's ranch as a possible source of the disease. The infected cattle, which were 2 or 3 years old, had wintered on Malcolm's Emigrant area ranch as yearlings.

"Now the focus is going to be on the Bridger herd and the area around the Bridger herd," Gov. Brian Schweitzer said Wednesday in a conference call. "This is an extraordinary event so we want to make sure we get everything right."

Malcolm and others had said that, if his cattle tested positive for brucellosis, elk from Yellowstone National Park had probably spread the disease.

In terms of possible exposure on the Bridger ranch, "there are all kinds of possibilities down there," Malcolm said.

The family uses some pasture south of Belfry, where there are large numbers of elk. It's "Why should we put all the cattle in Montana at risk when it's such a small hot zone? We need to aggressively manage this."

— Gov. Brian Schweitzer

possible, he said, that elk from eastern Yellowstone migrated to that area. Plus, the ranch neighbors Wyoming, which lost its brucellosis-free status in 2004.

The governor suggested that cattle from brucellosis-infected zones in Texas or Mexico could also be in the area. Cattle health records are not always complete or accurate.

Malcolm, who is also a Republican legislator representing Park and Sweet grass counties, said Wednesday he was relieved with the negative test results, but didn't know what would happen

next.

He said federal inspectors told him his herd would have to be retested in 30 days and in six months. And he's not sure whether he's allowed to resume sales of his purebred Angus cattle, which he markets mostly as breeding stock.

"They said we were under quarantine," he said.

He said APHIS officials haven't answered his questions and haven't explained procedures to him.

Meanwhile, the governor noted that if another infected herd is found in Montana, the state would lose its brucellosis-free status, which would mean mandatory testing and other measures before cattle could be exported out of state.

"We've watched a slow-moving train wreck," Schweitzer said.

He renewed his call of the past two years for a special management zone around Yellowstone, the last major reservoir of brucellosis in the nation. Potential boundaries of that "hot zone" could be Pray in Paradise Valley, Big Sky in the Gallatin Valley, Cameron in the Madison Valley and Nye or Luther in the Stillwater Valley.

All cattle leaving the zone would be tested for the disease, he said. APHIS would pay for the extra tests.

And if two herds become infected, it wouldn't mean the loss of status for all herds in the state.

"Why should we put all the cattle in Montana at risk when it's such a small hot zone?" he asked. "We need to aggressively manage this."

He called on the state's beef industry to get behind him.

The Montana Cattlemen's Association backs the plan, but the politically powerful Montana Stockgrowers Association and the Montana Farm Bureau have panned it. Federal officials have been lukewarm or nonresponsive, Schweitzer said.

Another factor is that the disease is widespread in the wild animals that carry it. Schweitzer said he considers the park's bison to be the "basic vector" of the disease.

"We know how to deal with that," he said, citing a quarantine, test and slaughter program that has worked for decades with cattle.

A number of people have called for such a program over the past 20 years, but it has never happened. While it might be physically possible to quarantine all 4,000 park bison, it has proved impossible politically. Eliminating brucellosis in the park would mean a lot of dead wildlife.

Removing brucellosis from the elk in and near the park could be even more difficult, since Wyoming has refused to remove its feedgrounds there, providing a breeding ground for brucellosis among thousands of densely packed elk.

Scott McMillion is at scottm@dailychronicle.com